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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 07 TASHKENT 000055

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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: ANATOMY OF A HIZB UT-TAHRIR CASE

REF: a) TASHKENT 2

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard Fitzmaurice, Poloff; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: This cable examines in depth a recent Hizb ut-Tahrir case reported by state-controlled and independent media and a local human rights activist. While the case highlights on-going abuses in the government's campaign against suspected religious extremists, it also demonstrates how activists and independent internet news websites also sometimes exaggerate details about such cases. Separately, state-controlled and independent media outlets reported on several arrests of HT members in Uzbekistan during 2008, though the numbers of such arrests still appears to be down from previous years (septel).

¶2. (C) Summary continued: On November 17, state-controlled media reported that Tashkent police had uncovered a Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) cell of 27 women. Police reportedly released the cell's leaders after they repented and provided names of other HT members. On December 3, poloff met with a group of women who reported that two of their female relatives were currently being detained by Tashkent police on suspicion of HT membership. The women also stated that one of their relatives was beaten by police and forced to watch a pornographic movie in an attempt to elicit a confession from her. From the discussion, it was unclear whether the case of the two detained women was connected to the HT cell of 27 women, as the relatives provided conflicting information about the total number of women detained. One of the activists who arranged the meeting later exaggerated details about the case in public reports, which were then picked up and further distorted by Radio Free Europe and a HT activist group in the United Kingdom. End summary.

AUTHORITIES UNCOVER HT CELL OF 27 WOMEN IN TASHKENT

¶3. (U) On November 17, the state-controlled UzReport.com and Gorizont.uz websites reported that police in Tashkent had uncovered a HT cell of 27 women in Tashkent after its existence had been reported to them by two residents of Tashkent's Sabir-Rahimov district, Nigora Ibragimova and Clara Rahimova. A preliminary police investigation reportedly showed that two other women, Karima Hikmatova and Muhabbat Sadykova, headed the HT cell and had attempted to recruit Ibragimova and Rahimova to raise funds, spread extremist literature, and recruit new members. During the investigation, Hikmatova and Sadykova reportedly revealed the identities of other HT leaders, including those who allegedly communicated with HT "foreign centers." The article reported that criminal charges were not brought against Hikmatova and Sadykova, who were released after they had repented "under guarantees by their relatives and mahalla (neighborhood committee) leaders."

¶4. (C) Shortly after the article appeared on the state-controlled websites, independent human rights activist Surat Ikramov released his own article about the case, directly referencing the Gorizont.uz article. In his article, Ikramov speculated that police would fabricate criminal cases against the detained women, particularly those with relatives already imprisoned for HT membership. He also reported that police arrested Nazokat Tashpulatova on November 17 and brought her to the Shayhantahur District police station, where they reportedly showed her photos of the detained women and demanded that she provide false information against them. According to Ikramov, Tashpulatova's father, step-father, mother, and brother were all previously imprisoned for

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HT membership.

WOMEN CLAIM RELATIVES INTERROGATED FOR HT MEMBERSHIP

¶5. (C) During two separate meetings arranged by Ikramov and Erk opposition activist Dilorom Ishakova on December 3, poloff met with three women who claimed that two of their female relatives were

being interrogated by Ministry of Interior officials in Tashkent. The first meeting, which was arranged by Ikramov, was with Nodira Karimova of Tashkent and Mavlyuda Yusupova from Kashkadarya province, who reported that their female relatives - Shakhllo Sultanova and her mother, Sevara Sultanova - were detained on separate occasions by police in Tashkent in November. The women stated that Sevara Sultanova was arrested by police on November 12 and was being held in pre-trial detention in the basement of the Tashkent City Ministry of Interior building. They also said that Sevara's daughter, Shakhllo Sultanova, was first detained by police as a witness against her mother on November 29.

SHAKHLO ALLEGEDLY BEATEN, FORCED TO WATCH PORNOGRAPHIC FILM

¶6. (C) Karimova and Yusupova reported that in a bid to force Shakhllo to confess that her mother was a HT member, police hit her on the head and forced her to watch a pornographic film, threatening that the same could happen to her. They said Shakhllo was released on November 30, but was called in by police for further questioning, along with her lawyer, on December 1 and December 3.

¶7. (C) In contrast, Karimova and Yusupova reported that they had no information on the treatment of Sevara Sultanova. They initially told poloff that a total of 27 women were being detained as part of the case, but then inexplicably said they knew of only ten other women who were detained as part of the case. They also reported that they did not know the ten other women and had no specific information about their cases. While Ikramov suggested in a November 30 article (see para 14) that the Sultanovas' case was connected to that of the 27 women, he told poloff on December 3 that he believed the Sultanovas' case was separate.

SECOND MEETING WITH SHAKHLO'S MOTHER-IN-LAW

¶8. (C) Poloff's second meeting on December 3, this time arranged by Erk opposition activist Dilorom Ishakova, was with Musharraf Hudoyberdiyeva, the mother-in-law of Shakhllo Sultanova. Hudoyberdiyeva reported that Shakhllo was called in for questioning a third time by police on that day. During the meeting, she received a phone call from Shakhllo's lawyer, who reported that while Shakhllo still had not confessed that her mother was HT, her mother had gone ahead and signed a confession that Shakhllo was a

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member of HT "since birth." The lawyer further reported that the other ten women detained in the case also had confessed that Shakhllo was a HT member, but again provided no specific information about the identities of the other detained women. Hudoyberdiyeva speculated that police might have threatened or used physical force against Sevara Sultanova to force a confession against her daughter.

¶9. (C) Since the two meetings in December 3, both Ikramov and Ishakova have not reported any new developments in the case, though Ikramov publicly released two articles about the case on November 30 and December 1 which exaggerated several details (see para 14).

SEVERAL OTHER RELATIVES OF WOMEN ALREADY IMPRISONED

¶10. (C) During the meetings with poloff, the three women explained that they had several other relatives imprisoned over the years for HT membership, some of whom had died in prison. Karimova explained that her husband was arrested in 2001 and sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment for HT membership and is currently serving his sentence at prison number 49 in Kashkadarya province. Karimova last saw her husband in September and noted that he had lost weight since his imprisonment. Her son was arrested in 2003 and originally sentenced to five years' imprisonment for HT. While imprisoned at the Jaslyk prison in Uzbekistan's Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, his prison sentence was reportedly extended by three and half years in 2007 after he was accused of praying in contravention of prison regulations (Note: Karimova was unclear about what "praying in contravention of prison regulations" meant. Prison officials report that inmates are freely able to practice their religion. However, activists have long reported that individuals, especially those convicted of religious extremism, have been punished for praying or praying outside of certain hours, such as before dawn. End note.) Karimova reported seeing bruises on her son's head during a meeting in February, at which time she was allowed to give him medicine, and last reported seeing her son in August.

¶11. (C) Yusupova reported that her husband was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for HT membership in 2000 and is currently being held at Jaslyk. She explained that prison officials refused, without explanation, to allow her to see her husband on two occasions in November. She reported hearing from the relatives of other inmates who visited Jaslyk that her husband was beaten on the heels and put into an isolation cell for reading a newspaper, supposedly in contravention of prison regulations (Note: Prisons in Uzbekistan have libraries, and we know of no formal regulations preventing inmates from reading newspapers. However, activists have long reported that religious prisoners typically face greater restrictions on their activities than ordinary inmates. End note.) She last reported seeing him in July. According to Yusupova, her husband contracted tuberculosis in prison and authorities have refused to give him medication.

¶12. (C) Hudoyberdiyeva reported that her son and Shakhlo's husband, Iskandar Hudoyberdiyev, was arrested in Surkhundaya province and sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment for HT membership in 2000 and is currently being held at a prison in Andijon. Her

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previous and current husbands were also reportedly arrested for HT membership. Her first husband, Farkhod Usmanov, was arrested and held at the Ministry of Interior building in Tashkent in 1999, where he was reportedly beaten to death by officers. In 2002, Hudoyberdiyeva remarried, and that same year, her second husband was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment for HT membership. Hudoyberdiyev last saw her husband at the Jaslyk prison in October, and observed that he still had difficulty walking due to a police beating he endured while in pre-trial detention in 2002. In addition, she reported that her brother, Shukrillo Azamov, was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for HT membership in 1999, but was released from prison in 2002. However, in 2003, he was arrested and imprisoned again for HT membership. In 2006, he died at a prison in Zarafshan from liver disease.

CONFICTING ACCOUNTS OF RELATIVES' HT MEMBERSHIP

¶13. (C) According to Karimova, both her husband and son were not religious extremists, but rather conservative Muslims who regularly attended prayers at a local Mosque. However, Hudoyberdiyeva admitted that both of her husbands and her son Iskandar (Shakhlo's husband) were HT members, though she maintained that Shakhlo and her brother were not HT members.

ACTIVIST REPORTS STORY PUBLICLY, HYPES DETAILS

¶14. (C) Before poloff's meetings with the women, Ikramov publicly distributed two articles about the case on November 30 and December 1 which exaggerated several details. In a November 30 article entitled "The Number of Arrests of Believers Is Growing," Ikramov claimed that all 27 women in the alleged HT cell were "interrogated and tortured." He also reported that both Shakhlo and Severa Sultanova were tortured. In a second article from December 1, Ikramov reported that Shakhlo had signed a confession after being tortured by six police officers. In each of these cases, what relatives reported to poloff (some of whose claims were made in front of Ikramov) did not back up the claims made in Ikramov's articles. A more accurate description of events was reported by the independent Uznews.net website (which, ironically, is usually among the least dependable sources of objective information about Uzbekistan), which stated that Shakhlo had been beaten and intimidated by Tashkent police in an attempt to force her to confess to membership in a religious extremist group.

OTHER RECENT DUBIOUS CLAIMS BY IKRAMOV

¶15. (C) Ikramov has made other dubious claims in public recently. While attending a Human Rights Day roundtable at the Embassy on December 10, he claimed, to the disbelief of everyone else in attendance, that the 2005 Andijon events "were completely orchestrated by the Karimov regime." After attending an evening reception, Ikramov was quoted by Radio Free Europe's Uzbek-language

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Ozodlik.org website as claiming that the only assistance provided to human rights defenders by the United States was inviting them to public events such as Human Rights Day. Ikramov had earlier made similar claims to poloff, despite the fact that he had participated in an International Visitor's program with several other independent human rights activists in September. His organization, which largely consists of himself, also has received more than 50,000 dollars in assistance from the Embassy's Democracy Commission since 2003, an amount far greater than what most other human rights group in the country have received.

¶16. (C) Comment: Ikramov has a large ego and frequently argues to poloff that he is the only serious human rights activist in Uzbekistan and often refuses to meet together with any other activists, claiming that they are all either hacks or government informants. He also constantly hounds poloff for further financial assistance through the Embassy's Democracy Commission fund and other sources. Given his peculiar personality and behavior, we believe Ikramov might be exaggerating details of HT cases to simply gain greater attention, either for the case at hand or simply for himself. It is possible that he believes the more attention is brought to his reporting, the more likely he will receive funding in the future. It is also possible that years of following such cases, which no doubt involve serious human rights violations, have conditioned Ikramov to jump to conclusions that the evidence at hand does not fully support. That said, we continue to believe that Ikramov is one of the more active human rights defenders in Uzbekistan and we will continue to closely follow his reporting (though this says more about the sorry state of local human rights organizations in Uzbekistan than it does about Ikramov). While some details are clearly hyped, there is usually a kernel of truth to Ikramov's reporting. He is also practically the only activist who publicly reports on HT cases on a regular basis, though his misreporting of the details of the Sultanovas' case leads us to wonder the degree to which he has exaggerated details about similar cases in the past. End comment.

¶17. (C) Ikramov's report on the Sultanova' case appears to have been picked up by Radio Free Europe's website, which on December 5 reported that 28 women were detained that week on religious extremism charges in Tashkent. The article quotes an unnamed source in the Tashkent police stating that two of the women were regional leaders of HT. The article, supposedly quoting Shakhllo, incorrectly identifies her as the "mother-in-law" of one of the detainees (Comment: We believe that RFE simply confused the identity of Shakhllo with that of her mother-in-law, Hudoyberdiyeva. End comment.) The "Shakhllo" quoted in the article claims that police "tortured her daughter-in-law in effort to get her to make a confession" and that "the detained group of women was filmed for a pornographic video" (Comment: We believe that either Ikramov or the relatives fed the exaggerated information to RFE, which either took their claims at face-value or did not fact-check its article very carefully. End comment.)

¶18. (C) On December 22, a group calling itself "the Sisters of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain" posted on its website that it held a demonstration in front of the Uzbek Embassy in London on December 20 and delivered a letter addressed to Uzbek Ambassador Otabek

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Akbarov and signed by Dr. Nazreen Nawaz, Women's Media Representative for Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain. The letter, which appeared to directly reference the December 5 RFE article, claimed that Uzbek authorities had arrested 28 Muslim women for membership in HT and filmed them for a pornographic video. The letter claimed that the incident showed that the "on-going repression of political dissent in Uzbekistan continues unabated since the Andijon massacres under the now overused guise of fighting terrorism..." and reflected "...a weak and desperate government, unable to quell the ever rising tide of support and unstoppable calls for the return of the Shariah and the Khilafah state in the region." The letter further alleges that the "Western governments" the Uzbek government sought as allies "have lost their moral authorities amongst their own people and the world over: preaching freedom, human rights, the rule of law, democracy and women's rights, yet they embrace dictatorships such as yours...some have even outsourced torture to your prisons in order to extract 'intelligence' as part of their war on terror..now they choose to ignore the sexual abuse of women in countries that are their allies - the degradation and humiliation of women, a fair price to pay it seems to protect their political interests."

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH ALSO PUZZLED BY CASE

¶19. (C) Poloff also discussed the case with Human Rights Watch researcher Anna Dolidze, who temporarily visited Uzbekistan in December. Dolidze reported meeting with Karimova and Hudoyberdiyeva and also being puzzled by the women's conflicting accounts of the total number of women allegedly detained in the case. She explained that according to HRW's case reporting and vetting guidelines, she could only confirm that Sevora Sultanova and Shakhllo Sultanova were detained by police and suffered some form of intimidation.

COMMENT

¶20. (C) The Sultonovas' case demonstrates that police continue to abuse suspected religious extremists. In previous years, there were frequent reports of individuals being detained on religious extreme charges based mostly on outward expressions of Muslim religious faith. Few such cases were reported in the last two years, as authorities now appear to be primarily targeting relatives of individuals already imprisoned on religious extremism charges. Whether or not the Sultanovas are actually HT members, several of their relatives are HT members, and Uzbek authorities clearly do not make such subtle distinctions. It is possible that such individuals are easy targets for police officers seeking to prove to their superiors that they are being tough on alleged terrorists. The fact that authorities appear to be now targeting female relatives also suggests that many male HT members have already been imprisoned, been driven deep underground after years of arrests, or have already fled to other areas with less severe repression, such as the Kyrgyz portions of the Ferghana Valley, where HT appears to be much more visibly active. Several sources have confirmed that HT is much less visibly active in Uzbekistan than ten years' ago (reftel), no doubt partly due to the government's severe crackdown on suspected members since the 1990s. Our main concern in such cases continues to be that suspects are

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frequently abused and denied due process. We also continue to worry that Uzbek prisons, where large numbers of suspected religious prisoners continue to be held (and only very rarely are released), could serve as incubators for a new generation of religious extremists.

¶21. (C) The case also provides a good example of how human rights violations are sometimes exaggerated by local activists and then misreported by independent internet news websites. Unfortunately, given the government's basic refusal to answer queries and the absence of international journalists and human rights groups on the

ground, internet news websites, mainly operated by exiles abroad, often remain the only publicly available source of information on internal developments in Uzbekistan. These websites in turn rely primarily on local activists for information, many of whom are tied to the political opposition and lack objectivity. After years of sensational human rights reporting - not all of it accurate - many are now given to believe anything they read about Uzbekistan on the internet, no matter how absurd, and information that is at best rumor is later cited as fact. Radio Free Europe has often played a key role in this phenomenon, as it is viewed by many as a more trustworthy source of information (which it frequently is not) and representing the official view of the U.S. government (though it makes no such claim). The Sultanovas' case is only one of several human rights-related cases misreported by RFE this year. As the Uzbek government also views RFE as representing the views of the U.S. government, distorted reports of human rights violations carried by RFE hurts our credibility and makes it more difficult to convince the government to take appropriate actions to alleviate human rights violations, a task that is already difficult enough. In this particular case, RFE's misreporting was also used to score propaganda points by an anti-Western group affiliated with HT. Nevertheless, Uzbek police continue to commit serious human rights abuses when investigating alleged religious extremists, and we will continue to follow such cases to the best of our ability.

BUTCHER

To view the entire SMART message, go to URL http://repository.state.sgov.gov/_layouts/OSS_SearchResults.aspx?k=messageid:f95c0114-f177-4ba5-a8